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Public education: compulsory and free? A paradox

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Abstract

Education has always played an important role in Iran. However, with the passage of the society from an agrarian to an industrial one, it has come to a focal point. Thereby, like many other countries, Iran has been focusing on public education and the ways to facilitate it. To materialize this objective, education is provided through government funds. According to Articles 19, 20, and 30 of the constitution, the government has to provide every citizen with free primary and secondary education not considering race, gender and ethnicity. Globally, education is not important per se; it is considered as a tool for development. Free and compulsory education for all the children would strengthen human rights internationally, but does not form global education strategies. This paper tries to investigate the meaning of public education, its necessity, and if it should be provided free or not.

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1. Introduction:

The main objective of education is providing an opportunity to channel and flourish the talents of children through certain programs. A program lacking quantitative aspects of educational planning would be an unwise one (UNESCO, 1986). So to develop a well-designed plan and predict the needs and facilities of the increasing students' population, the study of quantitative and population variables seems inevitable. However, it should be pointed out that students' statistics and figures are not the only concerns of the governments. They have to decide as to who run the educational system and fund the costs of education. There are two seemingly opposing views; one claiming that governments must be in charge, while the other asserts people must have a say. Accordingly different countries have different approaches and therefore, not similar results are achieved.

But what factor or factors cause the differences and what are the determining factors in investing the education resources? To answer the questions, this paper deals with the following points:

1. Education in Iran, past and present
2. The government and public obligations in meeting education costs
3. The relationship of mandatory education laws with paying tuition
4. Free education, cost analysis, their resources in Iran and some other countries will be discussed.

2. The importance of education in Iran: past and present

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Historically, Iranians have been strong, hardworking, content, and adoptable. Actually among other factors, natural forces have been quite influential. Iran was neighbouring Central Asia tribes and nomads who had uncontrolled population growth and lacked the primary resources and facilities. So they were always facing the risk of invasion by these hungry-stricken people. To know how to fight back, Iranians needed education and training. On the other hand, Iran enjoyed joint borders with China to the east and India with the west, both culturally rich countries. Located on the famous Silk Road, Iranians had the opportunity to enrich their own knowledge and sciences through contacts with Chinese and Indian great teachers and in their turn spread this knowledge to other countries.

Religion also, especially Zoroastrian religion, has played an important role in education. This religion put too much emphasis on knowledge and learning and has urged its followers to develop education and training. It has even assigned an angel, Chista, for teaching (Gilani quoting Vakilian, 2005, 21). In *Vendidad*, a holy Zoroastrian book, one reads, “if a stranger, a friend, or a brother come to you for education, accept him and teach whatever he demands” (Gilani quoting Keshavarzi, 2005, 56). In *Dinkerd*, another religious text, it is written, “Education is as important as life, and every one must promote himself through education, reading, and writing” (Gilani quoting Keshavarzi, 2005, 81).

In Achaemenian era, following Zoroastrian doctrines of good speech, good behaviour, and good deed, they paid too much attention to educating their children. Altars were the formal schools of teaching and the Magi taught religion, medicine, math, and astrology (Nemati, Limaee, 2006).

Now education is provided through government. According to the Articles 19, 20, and 30 of the constitution, the government must provide free primary and secondary education for all children, regardless of race, gender, religion, or ethnicity. But what is meant by free education? Providing educational services demands scarce resources, so it cannot be that free. Even if the government provides all the costs, it necessarily does not mean free. Students are implicitly required to pay some sort of tuition everywhere, but the amount depends on the government support and the credits provided by the private sector. In countries where government pays a large amount of the costs, the tuition is not usually high (Emadzadeh, 2003, 137).

Formal education includes different subjects and the more important materials, reading and writing are taught earlier. This education demands systematic formal teaching as well as technical information (Roth Bard, 2006).

All the countries are now aware of the importance of education and they try to develop it through different means (Ghobadipour, 1997). Ward, the American sociologist, believes that “education has grave effects on human development, because if he is well-educated, he would be able to solve the present problems and the barriers to social and economic development would be wiped out”.

New advances in science and technology and the speed at which scientific and technological methods are changing, is amazing. Ignoring proper education and neglecting the balance of qualitative and quantitative measures with those of technology and science would lead to deadlocks and impasses in every development plan.

3. Educational objectives:

According to the UN global report on education in January 2010, it has witnessed a steady growth globally, but there still remains lot to do. The prospect of third millennium development plan is guaranteeing education for all children by 2015. Some countries like Tanzania had had overwhelming advance. In 1997 about 50% of the children attended schools while now it abounds to 98%. According to the same report, to get to the optimal standards of 2015, the governments still face a 16 billion dollar deficit.

In his inauguration speech, the United Nations Secretary General, Ban Ki-moon stated, “education is not a privilege; it is a basic human right”. He urged the governments to comply with the 2015 plan requirements. But

there is no political will to do so and encouraging the governments is still the greatest challenge (UN Global Report, 2010, New York)¹.

There is invaluable evidence indicating the positive effects of primary education in reducing poverty and materializing social and economic development. The available documents show that in developing countries people with higher education, among other things, have higher income, better jobs, higher agricultural production, controlled child birth, and better health. All these factors are indicators of development (Lockhid et al, 1989, 22). Education right makes the authorities feel responsible; but in spite of human rights international laws and national constitutions, private primary school tuitions comprise more than 30 percent of the households' annual budget and is five times as much as primary public education (Tomasevski, 2006)

4. Free education, cost analysis, and resources:

The lowest human right standards require that education be free up employment, but the ways in which the budgets of some countries are provided, indicate the violation of these standards. To be more precise we have included some countries' educational programs in the following tables. It is evident that despite global organizations' emphasis on free education, most Middle East and North Africa countries provide education budget through the help of the households (Tomasevski, 2006). A survey of education resources in other countries indicates that those which have lessened costs have been able to encourage more school attendance and thus pave the way toward development.

Table1. Middle East and North Africa: free education, legally and in practice

Tuition		Legal guarantee for free education		Country	Tuition		Legal guarantee for free education		Country
No	Yes	No	Yes		NO	Yes	No	Yes	
/			/	Morocco	/			/	Algeria
/			/	Amman	/			/	Bahrain
	/		/	Qatar		/	/		Djibouti
/			/	Saudi Arabia		/		/	Egypt
	/		/	Sudan		/		/	Iran
/			/	Syria		/		/	Israel
/			/	Tunisia	/			/	Jordan
	/		/	United Arabic Emirates	/			/	Kowait
	/		/	Yemen		/		/	Lebanon
					/			/	Lybia

Table2. Guaranteeing free education: laws and activities in Asia

Tuition		Legal guarantee for free education		Country	Tuition		Legal guarantee for free education		country
No	Yes	No	Yes		No	Yes	No	Yes	
/		/		Myanmar		/		/	Afghanistan
/			/	Nepal		/		/	Bangladesh

/	/	Pakistan	/	/	Bhutan
/	/	New Guinea	/	/	Cambodia
/	/	Philippines	/	/	China
/	/	Singapore	/	/	Fiji
/	/	Srilanka	/	/	India
/	/	Timor-Leste	/	/	Indonesia
/	/	Thailand	/	/	Korea
/	/	Vanuatu	/	/	Laos
/	/	Vietnam	/	/	Maldives
			/	/	Mongolia

Chi-square test was used to see if there is a relationship between compulsory education and paying for education.

Table 3. Frequencies

Legal guarantee of free education			
	Observed N	Expected N	Residual
yes	30	21.0	9.0
no	12	21.0	-9.0
Total	42		

Charges levied			
	Observed N	Expected N	Residual
yes	29	21.0	8.0
no	13	21.0	-8.0
Total	42		

Test Statistics		
	Legal guarantee of free education	Charges levied
Chi-Square	7.714 ^a	6.095 ^a
df	1	1
Asymp. Sig.	.005	.014

a. 0 cells (.0%) have expected frequencies less than 5. The minimum expected cell frequency is 21.0.

As seen, the results indicate no relationship. Besides, compulsory education does not imply the full mandate of government in education system. Therefore, in most countries education system is run through partnership. Let's consider the way poor countries tackle this situation.

In the second half of 20th century, after mass communication development, poverty and backwardness of many of the so-called developing countries became more evident. Hence, through familiarity with the developments of other nations, people demanded their related governments to revolutionize their socio-economic status. In response,

governments started planning and programming. Promoting standards needed more complicated budget allocation programs.

Nowadays a budget represents the full scope of categories which a government has on its hands to develop the nation (Salehi, 2010, 24). Accordingly each country allocates a part of its GDP to education.

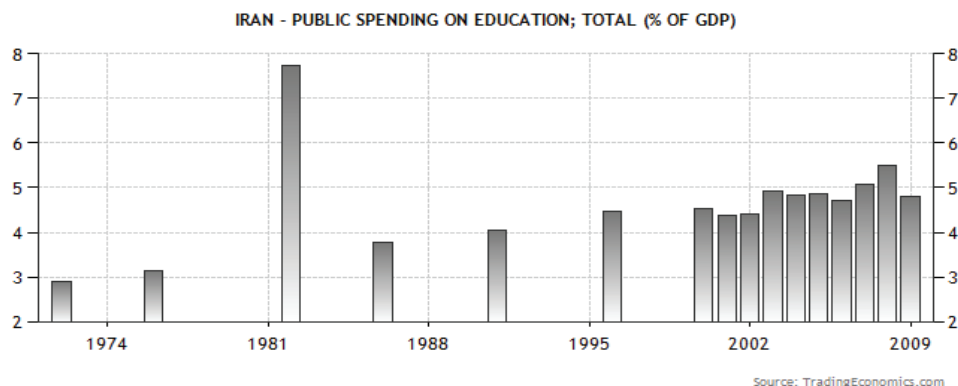


Figure1. Iran: Public Spending on Education: Total (% of GDP)

As seen, Iran's GDPs in 2008 and 2009 were 5.5% and 4.79% respectively. Clearly education plays an important role in economic, social, and cultural development and the development measure of each country is based on the amount of investment on children and teenagers. These groups are the future human resources and the main capital of each country. In 3rd millennium development plan objectives, education is central to development, but why many countries still neglect it?

The main problem is the presence of many conflicting global strategies on education. UN and UNESCO have formally accepted education right, but many others have not. Instead education has been viewed from a demand and supply prospective which in turn violates government functional role in compulsory education. As a result governments are under double pressure of providing free education as well as sharing it with the households.

Due to different factors, the costs of education surge sharply. One of the factors is the demand of society for educational services which leads to the increase of the costs through population increase, employing a larger number of teachers, and promoting education quality.

Besides larger educational sites, highly-equipped buildings, hi-tech machinery, stadiums and indoor sports centers, amphitheaters, libraries, computer sites, internet, and green space, all and all have increased education costs (Emadzadeh, 2003, 133-134). Therefore, globally what supposed to be free education requires tuition.

People of the same social class have the same sociability, so they share the same values, lifestyles and interests. Each group seeks a higher share of wealth, power, and status in society and it is here that a paradox emerges. Some believe that education reduces and tries to decrease inequalities, while paradox theory makers believe education reproduces inequality in income, power, and status. Values, rules, and institutions, all reflect the interests of dominant groups and education is not an exception (Sharepour, 2007, 69).

5. Conclusion

Many countries and international agencies do not believe in free education as a human right. Military budgets far exceed the educational ones. Global education strategies do not support it and just define it as a responsibility and public service; and where the demand is higher, the households have to undergo accepting some part of the costs.

Thus compulsory education is not enough reason for parents to share education costs. In many countries, parents have shown their partnership through paying taxes; yet they still have to pay for their children's education. This very notion makes governments provide some mechanisms to help low-income families with education and educational facilities.

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